



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

Book Reviews: Lez Cooke, *Style in British Television Drama*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. ISBN 978-1-137-26591-3; Su Holmes. *Entertaining Television: The BBC and Popular Television Culture in the 1950s*. Manchester University Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-7190-7791-3

Johnston, D. (2015). Book Reviews: Lez Cooke, *Style in British Television Drama*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. ISBN 978-1-137-26591-3; Su Holmes. *Entertaining Television: The BBC and Popular Television Culture in the 1950s*. Manchester University Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-7190-7791-3. *Critical Studies in Television*, 10(1), 96-98. <https://doi.org/10.7227/CST.10.1.7>

Published in:
Critical Studies in Television

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights
Copyright 2015 Manchester University Press

"The definitive, peer-reviewed and edited version of this article is published in:
2015, Lez Cooke, *Style in British Television Drama*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. ISBN 978-1-137-26591-3; Su Holmes. *Entertaining Television: The BBC and Popular Television Culture in the 1950s*. Manchester University Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-7190-7791-3, *Critical Studies in Television*, Vol 10: Issue 1, pages 96-98, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/CST.10.1.7>

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Cooke, Lez, *Style in British Television Drama*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. ISBN 978-1-137-26591-3

Holmes, Su, *Entertaining Television: The BBC and Popular Television Culture in the 1950s*, Manchester University Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-7190-7791-3

These two books present different approaches to the study of television. In particular they present two different approaches to the study of *popular British* television, thereby avoiding the common tendencies in much current publishing on television to focus on 'quality' or 'cult' television, usually American. While such focuses are obviously valid, useful and interesting, they do mean that there are dangers of losing sight of the specificity of national televisions, and of the vast body of programming that does not fit into either of the 'quality' or 'cult' categories. Significantly, both Cooke and Holmes seek, to varying degrees, to make connections between the history of British television and current debates and ideas, indicating the significance of exploring the history of national television programming in understanding how we reached our current situation. The strands of historical research presented by Cooke and Holmes demonstrate how we can unpick accepted ideas of what television should be, how it should look and how it should relate to its audiences, to better understand where these received notions come from, and how they influence what we see on television today.

Cooke presents a series of nine close readings of dinner table scenes from programmes ranging from the 1954 adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to 2001's *Teachers*. By concentrating on a specific type of scene, Cooke is able to focus on the changes in aesthetics between the programmes, emphasising the shifting forms of television. This is thus partly a survey of historical developments, with advances in camera technology and from live production to recorded, but it is also an examination of how an apparently simple scene can be approached in a number of different ways, with differing results and effects.

Commented [DCD1]: 'forms' (plural)?

Commented [DCD2]: Repetition?

Where Cooke focuses on the aesthetics of programmes, and so has a necessary emphasis on what is seen on the screen, Holmes frequently refers to productions which cannot now be seen. Nevertheless, television aesthetics are a recurring concern of the book, particularly the use of the camera in relation to ideas of privacy, revelation and presentation of the individual. *Entertaining Television* particularly seeks to demonstrate that the BBC was a key producer of popular television in the 1950s, and not the purveyor purely of the well-meaning but rather dull programming that the BBC itself often suggests in its presentation of its own past. Holmes does this through examining a number of popular genres more commonly associated with commercial television: the soap opera, quiz and game shows, and the problem show. She also considers the issue of celebrity and television fame as a particular point of concern not only at the BBC, but also more broadly within British culture in the 1950s. Central to this book, then, are questions of taste, primarily in the relationship between the BBC and its audiences, but also in the recording and retelling of television history, which can fall into the easy but incorrect presentation of the popular, the entertaining and the arguably intrusive as belonging purely to commercial television, as opposed to the high-minded, paternalistic BBC. Holmes conclusively demonstrates that this simplistic presentation of British television history is wrong and that we need to understand the complexity of our television past in order to understand our relationship to television now.

Despite the call of Catherine Johnson and Rob Turnock's *ITV Cultures* (2005) to rebalance the historical consideration of British television to incorporate a greater attention to ITV's output, both Cooke and Holmes concentrate on the BBC. For Holmes, this is part of the point, as she is emphasising the problems with seeing ITV as the home of the popular, which remains the dominant view. For Cooke, though, this is more problematic.

Of the nine productions he examines, only three are not BBC productions: the first episode of Granada's *Coronation Street* (1960–present) the first episode of LWT's *Upstairs*,

Downstairs (1971-5) and an episode of the Channel 4 series *Teachers* (2001-4). However, there is little consideration of the significance of the institutions involved, leaving unanswered the question of whether or not the institution was significant in terms of production and suggesting, by omission, that there are and have been no real differences in the aesthetics of the different television companies. While there is a mention that LWT were anxious about the possibility of there being no audience for *Upstairs, Downstairs*, there is no consequent discussion of how the aesthetics of the series may have been seen as attempting to meet the needs of attracting a perceived audience, and whether those attempts were to support an existing audience for the ITV franchise, or to draw over viewers from the competitor BBC. The differences that make a programme seem suitable for a particular channel are extremely difficult to assess, but it would have been interesting and informative if the research conducted here had pointed to the presence or absence of differences based on this close reading. For example, the note that *Upstairs, Downstairs* was originally intended to focus more on the servants, but that it became 'a more typical costume drama' as it developed suggests negotiations of genre and of understanding of the audience that could be very informative (p. 78).

Overall, Cooke's is an interesting and tightly-focused book concerned only with the development of aesthetic styles in television, due primarily to changes in technology, but also influenced by changing ideas of television style. This is tied loosely to ideas of shifting audience taste and wider cultural change, but these are largely indicated briefly rather than extensively engaged with. What we are left with is a clear demonstration of close textual analysis and how it can be used to examine the development of television style. This then opens up the possibilities of examining such details while making closer connections between the aesthetic and other aspects such as the audience or channel identity. As such, then, this is a very useful book, and one likely to inspire further work.

Commented [DCD3]: 'in'? reads a bit oddly as it is...?

Commented [DCD4]: This sounds odd (largely/briefly) - how about 'these are generally briefly indicated'?

Commented [DJ5]: How about 'generally just indicated'?

Similarly, Holmes provides a useful resource for reconsidering the earlier years of British television, while leaving significant areas that could still be examined in a similar way. For example, she does not address the enormous popularity of Westerns during the 1940s and 1950s, which again began on the BBC before ITV was even conceived. The variety show is ripe for exploration and would have fitted closely with the concerns of Holmes' book, particularly as it offered a connection between the worlds of the theatre and television, and so presents further opportunities for considering the differences in aesthetics, in appropriateness of type of entertainment and performance, and in celebrity and stardom. But to say that these are possibilities is only to emphasise that Holmes' *Entertaining Television* encourages the desire for such expansion of scope and is convincing on the importance of such research.

Derek Johnston
Queen's University, Belfast

References

Catherine Johnson and Rob Turnock, eds. 2005. *ITV Cultures*. Berkshire/New York: Open University Press.

Programmes – NOT REFORMATTED SC

Births, Marriages and Deaths (World Productions, BBC2, 1999)

Coronation Street (Granada, ITV, 1960-present)

Nineteen Eighty-Four (BBC, 1954)

Teachers (Tiger Aspect Productions, Channel 4, 2001-4)

Upstairs, Downstairs (London Weekend Television, ITV, 1971-5)